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Writing Sample

Gozo Yoshimasu

Includes "Premonition," "Pulling in the Reins," "The Far Side of the Moon," "Burning," "Autumn Flowers," and "Organ."

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A Thousand Steps...and More
Selected Poems and Prose 1964-1984

By Yoshimasu Gozo.

Katydid Books. Rochester, Michigan. 1987.

Translated by Richard Arno, Brenda Barrows, and Takako Lento.

Stepping Out

Yoshimasu Gozo's first book of poems, *Departure (Shuppatsu)* appeared in 1964 when he was 25. Since that first step outward he has been in constant motion, exploring, writing, voicing. In 1978 his *Complete Works* appeared in five volumes. The books, prose and poetry, now number well over a dozen, his extraordinary readings (rooted in the oldest Japanese style of recitation) have mesmerized audiences in Europe and North America as well as Japan, and he has received, besides a number of foreign honors, the Rekitei, Hanatsubaki, and Takami Jun Japanese literary awards.

Like all voyagers, Yoshimasu is a risk-taker. The sometimes baffling forms he shapes are in themselves a reminder of our fundamental flexibility, our capacity for an almost infinitely modulated response to the changing flow of reality despite the passing domination of one theory or another. There is an echo of Shelly in Yoshimasu's conviction that it is principally image and imagination, not reason and analysis, that determines our human response to events. We are ruled by images, and only the ancient imagemaker, the poet, has the necessary skill and rooted strength to counter the manipulative imagery aimed at us by motivational engineers whipping up this or that commercial, political or ideological product.

Skilled manipulators possessed of the most sophisticated devices and supported by great wealth cluster around the centers of power and appeal to our most infantile greed while promising instant and lasting satisfaction, final solutions, if only we will do what all good children must do—follow our leaders. Japan only recently has gone through the now familiar cycle of captivation by military powerdreams, then military defeat, then foreign military occupation. Now, despite its Buddhist heritage of minimizing desire to achieve greater inner freedom, it has moved on to the next stage of modernity—compulsive consumerism, with all the attendant economic power-dreams.

To poets like Yoshimasu, the Japanese tendency to seek harmony by conforming to high-level, high-sounding definitions of the Greater Good makes their society particularly vulnerable to the powerful manipulative messages once more emanating from the Center. Those messages depend enormously on generalization

and abstraction and on a semblance of logic to attractively package their single product -over simplification. To Yoshimasu this linear, pseudo-realistic style has been wholly compromised by the sales machine. So he steps out of it. To the monotone of persuasion he offers a range of alternative voices and reality models that reflect our capacity to be something other than passive before the delivery systems that converge on each of us.

When compared to the fantasies, doubletalk, and doublethink that are the stock and trade of a dream-machine forever selling this or that Belief, Product, Solution, the work of poets like Yoshimasu can seem pure realism. Poetry, like the sciences, tries to perceive more fully what in fact is going on, however complex and confusing that may be, and to come up with forms adequate to its discoveries-forms that do not, unlike the idiot promises of instant gratification, offer themselves as final or perfect. Yoshimasu comes from a long line of seers and bards who speak in ways designed to encourage spirit toward larger views, freer responses. His voice and ways of seeing, modern in his refusal to "make sense" by fitting into a standard mainstream of received ideas and programmed babble, are rooted in the deep Japanese past, in its profound respect for the mysteries that glimmer like seafire within our nets

"fishermen, please be careful."

Thomas Fitzsimmons

Yoshimasu Gozo

by Iijima Koichi

I first noticed Yoshimasu Gozo when his second book, *Gold Poems*, came out in 1970. It was an historic event in modern Japanese poetry.

A number of strict taboos controlled prewar Japanese poetry, especially poetry written after 1926, when the Showa era under emperor Hirohito began. One was against shouting and exclaiming; another was against running or moving at top speed. Poets then thought of themselves as gardeners, trimming and adjusting phrases and words rather than expressing their feelings directly and revealing the turmoil and utter chaos that actually underlay and sustained their poems in spite of all their efforts at immaculate surface control. It's true that some poets presented a facade of swaggering and heroic posing, but their poems were rarely the result of spiritual struggle and power. Yoshimasu Gozo is not a gardener. He has a sensitivity to deep rhythms that allows him to endure the wildest screams, speed, midair collisions. He writes in long, arcing cadences and lines that explode like water at the bottom of a waterfall, bursting and boiling back up in sounds that are always more than simply noise. His music can't be accounted for.

A couple of examples will show the terrain over which Yoshimasu climbed on his way to *Devil's Wind*:

Morning
running
when I get to the window
the tide's up to the second floor rocks
running
shadows running Tokyo

Even these few lines from "Running Wild" show how hard and how long Yoshimasu has been running. Almost thirty years ago he wrote "The Child Who Can't Stop Running," and he continues to move forward as if he were possessed. Because he is possessed. He runs as no Japanese poet ever has before. In "Gold Rope in Morning Mist" he sets out with "you," his car: "Today / careening through morning mist / we chase a huge, final landscape, a scene off a picture scroll of Buddhist paradise / west, west / riding the Contessa S / 6 A.M., September 19, 1967 / mist over the whole Musashino plain / we cut across rows of keyaki trees / run out of control, you and I, held together by a gold rope / both of us flying / the fields are music / running, running, running / when I finish this poem / watch my face closely / and pity it." Then: "Your purple shutters are blast furnaces / people will call it masturbation / but this pleasure is my only sexuality

and yours.

2.

In the long poem "Cradle," he lulls us with loneliness:

Growing eggplants. It is Rimbaud, it is the ancient Chinese recluse poet T'ao Ch'ien. Poets have always been tempted by this life. But in the air conditioned age, in polluted modern Tokyo, a young poet singing like this? Then down dives his roaring, shuddering soul. From the beginning Yoshimasu has been obsessed with souls. At first I wasn't impressed, but after I visited Miyako Island in the Ryukyus, where spirits and shamanesses and goddesses still live, I learned to take souls more

seriously. Several experiences since then have taught me that Yoshimasu's soulstorm is no fiction.

High wind warnings for the north Japan Sea-,

It caught me by surprise. And then "fishermen, please be careful" trapped me with its tenderness. I don't like to use the word lightly; but this line shows us the other side of Japan today. The age of tenderness.

Another line winding in and out of "Cradle" always astonishes me with its commitment to the tiny sounds of history:

I've heard there are hospital ships-, is one in the
bay?

Yoshimasu was only a child during the war, and the ships were a distant legend. Yet he pulls the past through the present and anchors it in a blind spot in our air. Not many contemporary Japanese poems have lines that suddenly lift the reader this way, although the compressed seventeen syllables of a haiku are still sometimes able to.

The magic walk goes on.

Yoshimasu makes people take this walk with him. And hear again at close range the name of a famous swimming champion:

Mr. Furuhashi Hironoshin.

The name runs through me like an electric shock, quickly followed by: I

DON'T KNOW WHY.

It cuts suddenly like the shaft of a searchlight, which, turning, reveals some of pride-hungry postwar Japan's most seductive fantasies.

Yoshimasu's style in *Devil's Wind* is marked above all by courage and endurance.

Be quiet I'm rushing to the exit -, magic marks,
catch your breath.

You, I want you born - but someone's breaking apart
 hanging in air
 - again just so Ma again Mama rice rushing
 to the exit emotions in my arms / stare out
 at the cosmos

It takes confidence to swing this high, to hang from an unknown and unknowable region. Reading "Cradle" changes your breathing, your heartbeat. It is a world of reversed images, a negative world, a world of fear.

There's a world in side mirrors we can't know it

I like to read this long poem slowly and quietly. In it are traces of a journey, by Orpheus, by Basho, by three decades after the war, by a contemporary Japanese poet, which may not be looked back on safely. A man runs through the dark holding out a stick. This stick is his only protection, tapping, making desperate holes in the wind. The great many punctuation marks, spaces, and dashes in *Devil's Wind* are holes opened by his stick. This discovery gives Yoshimasu the length and scale he needs.

This long poem is slowly shattering Yoshimasu's heart. We who read *Devil's Wind* on the printed page hear it only quietly. I still remember the first time I heard Yoshimasu give one of his unique "readings." It took him more than forty minutes to get through "Cradle" and part of "Ema" in what was a trance-song rather than what is usually meant by a poetry reading. When he chanted, from "Ema,"

COSMO MORE WAS SWAYING A MAZDA COSMO WAS SWAYING TOO WAS
 SWAYING

he was on the border of another world than sanity. Cosmo, the name of a Mazda car model, had become cosmos, had become peaches (*momo*), had become thighs (*momo*). In Yoshimasu's long voice all four were having sex with each other. The great swoopings of his emotions threatened me, attacked me, finally terrorized me. Then, when it was over, he came and sat down and smiled softly at me.

Translated by Christopher Drake

Premonition

Closing my mind to a premonition.
If it were spoken, this soul
fallen like a dead leaf
would surely be left all alone.
Madness and premonitions come without clothes and
it won't do to leave them naked.

Feeling fingers slowly close: sublime,
a mountain range, transparent black the banks
of a heart. Tens of thousands of human beings
lined up in their wombs. They're watching me,
and certainly not from the outside.

Pulling in the Reins

Walking along a river bank in an antiquated universe. A tall
woman approaches
passes me by. She looked like Kudara the
Goddess of Mercy. Black woman? In the
dim light I couldn't tell. The universe
already old growing older
Japan since the days of the Shoguns like
a small boat.
Walking along a river bank I
recall the phrase "Mirrors and
sex are guilty
of increasing the number of people."

Eros, everywhere!

Ship of death.

Seduction.

The Far Side of the Moon

On the far side of the moon
I can see a human form, walking
the remains of a corpse in a bamboo basket.
Cremation is impossible here so he strains his
back to stand. The moon quaking
the shadow growing longer in the shadow of a mountain gently
quaking. The moon
once a planet like a giant ball of sea weed
now rising in the dusk
floating in haze like the soul of a dead man. On
the far side of the moon I can see a human form.
Turning to night in a haze of red. So, this is the
moon.

Burning

The gold sword glares at the sun
Ah
pear blossoms cross over the immutable star!

Wind blows
over a land in Asia
a soul, a wheel,
runs on the clouds

My wish
is to become blind
to become the sun and an apple
Not to resemble
but to become
breasts, the sun, apple, paper, pen, ink, and a dream
I might become a fearsome rhythm

Tonight, I dare you
Get into your sports car
Tattoo your face
With a shooting star.
You!

Autumn Flowers

Did you get a chance to look at what seemed to me an improvised "altar", or a "flower arrangement" done by someone who had never done one before in his life but ended up making one anyway? How did you feel, I wonder. I noticed something. The materials-are they called dry flowers?-can be left for months, even without water, and they don't change. I'm told they are called cat's tail; in Japanese (according to the dictionary) *gama*, *tokusa*, *sugina*. When I went to pick those dry stalks, which are brown and shaped like *yaki tori* skewers, they gave way lightly with a dry snap. Since they are dry flowers, I could lean them against a wall and play around with them a little bit. If they had been wet flowers (?), it would have been a mess. Any daydreamer like myself (deluded idealist? believer in unreality) would end up I'm sure feeling as though he were harvesting a rice paddy. (Losing the harvest to a dry wind is such a worry ...) For some reason I've grown quite fond of the looks of these overgrown(?) dry flowers (dehydrated trees, dehydrated flowers).

Suddenly after two or three months, a white, fine-haired (or fuzzy) type of flower grows on the cat's tail- Ah, so that's why it's called "cat's tail." Dry flower play-with a kind of soft, fine-haired tail.

All food in America is natural; it seems that adding the name "natural" sells. There's a type of, well, fashionable food store where juice and eggs and vegetables are more expensive than at a regular supermarket. Although I don't like going to such affected places, they do have *tofu* and *miso* . . . They also sell various types of seeds for growing sprouts; so, making use of the breaks in my busy schedule, I've started cultivating sprouts in my kitchen. In a famous poem of post-war Japan by Kuroda Yoshio, *The Breeding of Poisonous Worms*, a mother decides to raise silk worms in a 4 1/2 *tatami* mat-room in a Tokyo-like *city*, and she starts chopping greens to feed them. What do you suppose brings that to mind. An itinerant, almost-bachelor type starts cultivating sprouts in an American kitchen. Does that make him the lone survivor of an agricultural race? I wonder.

I push a cart in a large American supermarket, do my shopping, and learn several reasons for loneliness. The first one is the absence of human voices. In that

type of market there is no roar of voices mingling and calling out. Well, there's no point in comparing it to the wild din of a Japanese dockside fish market. The scene that contains the gusty song of a big catch is fine; and the silent pushing of a shopping cart past rows of groceries is fine, too. *Excuse me.*

In the kitchen the refrigerator and oven whisper in the night, in their vicinity is the source of sound; the neighbor's faucet screams. In the *tokonoma* I make a scene of dead trees; and I go out with that scene of dead trees in my eyes. In the photograph can't you see the shadows of a rice harvest? At the bottom of the swamp is the sea. It is, to think of something strange, the end of the cycle; time to pay for the harvest. When you pick a dry flower, it goes *snap*.

Organ

A train is stopped on a bridge.

River winds brush the cheeks of a boy
his face in the window, questioning. A winter day. The wind
that sweeps the river bed is a wind from the cosmos-
cold but tinted pale green. Children, of trout, looking
up. Even now, larvae of the river termite live on the pier of
the bridge.

Larvae's associates: several young girls.

The rising sun shines in. Shha, shu, rustling paper.
Associates of H2O-to their surprise-touch a piece of
paper.

Where is the odor of a memory? Under
rocks, in the home of worms? Sweet
stones within memory.

A gleam in the river termite's kimono.

The under part of the bridge is a warped building,
so one can go there and plant one's bottom in a grassy place
rocky indulgence summer reverie.

A train is stopped on a bridge. The rescue team
doesn't come.

Does the rusty spike tell a story?

You don't know? I don't know.

River winds brush the cheeks of a boy,
his face in the window, questioning. A clear-sky turtle
neck sweater. A winter sun shining down, warming the rivets. A
train was stopped on the bridge.

In an instant of brilliant sunshine, all four seasons pass
through the window. In Eastern Europe, there must be
beautiful hand-organs, sometimes played by the air. A
broadcast in an exotic tongue. Heads are bowed.

Is there a new spike?

You don't know? I don't know.

River winds brush the cheeks of a boy,
his face in the window, questioning. A clear-sky turtle
neck sweater. Air brakes, a sound of wind, pomegranate
seeds, dadada, dadada, speakers, bugles.

In a hospital room, biding my time, reading a newspaper, thinking of a plan. Air
brakes.

A tiny skirt blown in the wind-the wind of a winter
day.

A chair is sitting in the riverbed, and on the other
side, the organ . . . it is the organ! In the pale green
wind, the brains of the river termite's larvae grow wrinkled.

A tiny skirt blown in the wind-the wind of a winter
day.

A train is stopped on a bridge.

The ATS doesn't function. Riverwinds brush the cheeks
of a boy, his face in the window, questioning. A clear
sky turtleneck sweater.

Upon the landscape is a beautiful 'dimple'.

A tiny skirt blown in the wind-the wind of a winter
day.

The announcer in the exotic tongue bows his head.

Riverbed, rivercouch
riversofa.

Facial tissues, social issues.

I don't know.

A train is stopped on a bridge. Across the wintry riverbed
blow thousands or millions of sheets of newspaper, gathering
beneath the bridge. Call it a rocky shore, call it the hour of the
horse. Even now, sometimes they find the tail feathers of arrows.
Between the rocks remain black hairs. Floodwaters come and go,
you would think they would be washed away. But the riverbed
has never been washed. I don't know when, a steel bridge was
built, a train, a winter day. A train is stopped on a bridge.